

**Wandering Genitalia:
Sexuality & the Body in German
Culture between the Late Middle
Ages & Early Modernity**

Ann Marie Rasmussen



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by

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Wandering Genitalia: Sexuality & the Body in German Culture between the Late Middle Ages & Early Modernity

This paper explores questions of obscenity, depictions of sex and the body that have the power to shock or offend, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the German-speaking lands of Northern Europe, not as moral phenomena, but as acts of imagination and creativity deeply implicated in political, social, and cultural discourses.¹ It grows out of research that began with the simple question: what did late medieval people know, and what did they imagine, when they thought about their bodies, and what is the relationship between the two?



Late medieval culture is replete with a cultural imaginary of willful, wandering genitalia, materialized in the discourses of natural philosophy, theology, and medicine (wandering wombs), and in jewelry, performative revelry, and comic texts. This paper treats three comic, late medieval German-language stories belonging to this tradition: *Das Nonnenturnier* [The Tournament of Nuns], *Gold und Zers* [Gold and Penis] and *Der Rosendorn* [The Rose Thorn]. All three texts are anonymous and are transmitted in fifteenth-century, German-language compilation manuscripts. In these texts the penis (*Nonnenturnier* and *Gold*) or the vulva (*Rosendorn*) is represented as an actor and agent, endowed with speech, intention, and mobility. Rhetorically speaking, these genitals are personifications: objects or ideas represented as having human qualities. Here the genitals are walking, talking metonymies for human beings, in which the part substitutes for the whole: quite literally the body part substitutes for the entire human being. This way of imagining the body and its genitalia differs significantly from a modern American analogue, the performance theater piece, *The Vagina Monologues*, by Eve Ensler from 1996.² *The Vagina Monologues* focus on imagining an internal organ, the inside of the body, whereas, as we shall see, the medieval texts and badges

This essay grows out of a lecture given under the auspices of CLAMS at King's College London, on 22 November, 2007. Warm thanks to Martin Jones, Clare Lees, and Julian Weiss for their helpful comments. I also wish to acknowledge an intellectual debt to Katherine Park, whose lecture and subsequent remarks at Duke University in November 2006 inspired a productive shift in the direction of this project.

¹ Two collections of excellent, interdisciplinary essays on medieval obscenity have recently appeared in English: Nicola McDonald, ed., *Medieval Obscenities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2006); and Jan M. Ziolkowski, ed., *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

² Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 2001). Text first published in 1998.

all display external genitalia. More importantly, in the *Vagina Monologues* the women speak for the vagina, on its behalf; in general terms, the body is understood to be a complex, interdependent whole or system in which the vagina and vulva are mute and it is the job of a mind enlightened by feminism to speak for them. In contrast, the medieval stories depict a vulva that comes to life, deserts its body (at least for a time) and most crucially, is imagined speaking independently, in its own voice.

Das Nonnenturnier, *Gold und Zers* and *Der Rosendorn* belong to a large corpus of late medieval obscene texts, attested to throughout Europe and still imperfectly understood.³ In the German cultural sphere, these include carnival plays (*Fastnachtspiele*), as well as obscene ballads, songs, and rhymed couplet texts such as *Minnereden* and *maeren* (*fabliaux*).⁴ Further, the texts being discussed in this paper share the representation of wandering genitalia with that found in other kinds of evidence: the administrative evidence documenting late medieval German carnival culture practices and, from the realm of visual culture, the so-called erotic, or sexual badges. The textual and visual evidence of wandering genitalia is from the fifteenth century, but the two types of evidence are not completely congruent geographically, since the sexual badges have been found primarily in Holland and the texts (including the administrative evidence about carnival practices) are primarily from Southern Germany. Yet these different kinds of evidence share a multitude of images, motifs, and metaphors, suggesting the existence of a shared culture of sex and the body, still poorly studied, across the German-speaking lands of late medieval Northern Europe, in which body functions and body parts such as wandering genitalia (otherwise regarded as taboo in polite usage) were represented by laypeople and clerics linguistically (in texts), visually (in images), and performatively (in ribald actions) in ways designed to defy moral norms and social conventions. This paper brings the visual and textual strands of this evidence into dialogue with one another, while remaining mindful of their specificity and particularity, in order to recover some sense of their cultural coherence.

³ For example, in the anonymous, Old French fabliau, *The Four Wishes of St Martin*, St Martin offers a husband four wishes. He is persuaded by his wife to give her the first wish. She wishes that he be covered with penises, which miraculously occurs. Angrily, he wishes that she be covered with vulvas. They immediately find this state of excess genitalia intolerable, however, and agree to use the third wish for the organs to disappear. 'But in a fatal lapse of reasoning the partners forget to stipulate that their original sex organs should remain intact. . . . They are forced to use their last wish to regain the normal sex organs with which they began.' E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 51.

⁴ On obscene medieval poetry in German, see Gaby Herchert, '*Acker mir mein bestes Feld*': *Untersuchungen zu erotischen Liederbuchliedern des späten Mittelalters: mit Wörterbuch und Textsammlung* (Münster: Waxmann, 1996); on carnival plays, see *Fastnachtspiele aus dem fünfzehnten Jahrhundert*, ed. Adelbert von Keller, 3 vols & appendix (Stuttgart: Litteraturverein, 1853–1858; rpt. 1965); and Klaus Ridder and Hans-Hugo Steinhoff, ed., *Frühe Nürnberger Fastnachtspiele* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).



Let us first look briefly at late medieval German carnival culture, relying here on the scholarship of Eckehard Simon.⁵ If we were time-transported to a late fifteenth-century German city, say Nördlingen or Nuremberg, at carnival time, what might we see? Surviving administrative documents (police records and city council minutes) suggest that alongside street dancing, streaking, carnival processions, public nudity, costumes and masques, cross-dressing, full-fledged tournaments and general rowdiness, we would witness a publicly enacted symbolic realm of the penis, including such things as lewd flashing of body parts by carnival participants, costumes with huge penises, men cross-dressing and pretending to have sex,⁶ and penis statues being paraded through the streets. Here is an example: ‘A 1510 record from Nördlingen . . . speaks of a tree covered with male members (*zageln*) making the rounds at carnival.’ Or: ‘On the Thursday after Ash Wednesday 1488, the five Nuremberg executive councilors ordered the supervisor of the craftsmen to identify the party that had “carried a disgraceful, lewd man-made member” (*schampar, unzuchtig, manns gemacht gelid getragen han*).’⁷ Related evidence survives in Italian penis tree frescoes from Massa Marittima,⁸ and in the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* anecdote about a witch who stole penises and kept them in a nest in a tree.⁹

To the best of my knowledge, none of the objects mentioned in the carnival evidence survive. However, these carnival creations are echoed by visual evidence of a different sort, namely the sexual badges, which have begun to receive focused scholarly attention

⁵ Eckehard Simon, ‘Carnival Obscenities in German Towns’, in *Obscenity*, ed. Ziolkowski, pp. 193–213. As Simon notes, ‘if you do something creatively obscene in public, authorities will take notice and you will become a statistic. It is little different today. My sources, then, are town-council protocols and decrees, like those of Basel and Nuremberg, police orders, sentences imposed by courts, and condemnations issued by church officials’ (p. 196).

⁶ Simon, ‘Carnival’, p. 200, notes a police record from Nördlingen in 1491, concerning two journeymen hatters from Augsburg, ‘one of whom costumed himself as a man, putting on a mask, it appears, and the other cross-dressed as a woman. Led by their friends, the two walked through the streets performing, as the court protocol put it, “unchaste acts in front of people” (“die sich zu unküschchen wercken vor dem volck erzaigt und bewysen haben”).’

⁷ Simon, ‘Carnival’, p. 199.

⁸ George Ferzoco, *Il murale di Massa Marittima - The Massa Marittima Mural* (Florence: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2005).

⁹ ‘As for what pronouncement should be made about those sorceresses who sometimes keep large numbers of these members (twenty or thirty at once) in a bird’s nest or in some cabinet, where the members move as if alive or eat a stalk or fodder. [. . .] She told the sick man that he should climb a certain tree and granted that he could take whichever one he wanted from the nest, in which there were very many members.’ *Malleus maleficarum* by Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, English and Latin, ed. and trans. Christopher S. Mackay, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), vol. 2, 118A, p. 280. On this motif see Walter Stephens, ‘Witches who steal penises: impotence and illusion in *Malleus maleficarum*’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 28 (1998), 495–529; also his book, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

in the last ten years, in part because of the sustained scholarly work and advocacy of the Beuningen Foundation in Rotterdam.¹⁰ Badges were small, mass-produced pewter or lead-alloy brooches and trinkets, cheap to buy, of which hundreds survive from the late Middle Ages. Most (sixty percent?) of the surviving badges have religious motifs, usually saints or objects associated with particular cult sites. Here, two examples are shown. The first badge depicts Saint Elisabeth of Hungary (or Thuringia), together with St Francis, with the Virgin Mary protecting them (Figure One). This fourteenth-century badge is associated with the pilgrimage cult site for St Elisabeth at Marburg.¹¹ Figure Two shows a badge from one of the most popular late medieval pilgrimage sites in Northern Europe, the Northern German town of Wilsnack, where three holy wafers that miraculously survived a fire were revered. This example of a Wilsnack badge lacks one of the usual three small, protruding crosses, one protruding from each wafer (such damage is typical for these fragile items), but it allows the viewer to discern the depiction of Christ's passion adorning each wafer.¹²

Medieval paintings and etchings show such religious badges being worn by pilgrims, pinned or sewn onto cloaks or hats. In the following example (Figure Three), a detail from a fresco in the Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence painted by Andrea de Bonaiuto between 1365-67, the elderly pilgrim's hat displays three badges: on the viewer's right, the scallop shell commemorating a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela; at the center top, an image that might represent the so-called 'Vera icon', a bust of Christ with long hair and a beard, belonging to Saint Peter's in Rome; and on the viewer's left, a third, undecipherable badge displaying a typical, Gothic architectural shape seen, for example, in badges for Thomas Beckett.¹³

¹⁰ H.J.E. van Beuningen and A. M. Koldewij, ed., *Heilig en Profaan 1: 1000 Laat-Middeleeuwse Insignes Uit de Collectie H. J. E. Van Beuningen*, Rotterdam Papers, vol. 8 (Cothen: Stichting Middeleeuwse Religieuze en Profane Insignes, 1993); and *Heilig en Profaan 2*, Rotterdam Papers, vol. 12 (Cothen: 2001). The Medieval Badges Foundation, which published the above volumes, supports a website, <http://www.medievalbadges.org/>. Two other useful databases of medieval badges are: <http://www.pilgerzeichen.de/>, *Wallfahrt und Pilgerzeichen*, Ein Projekt des Lehrstuhls für Christliche Archäologie, Denkmalkunde und Kulturgeschichte an der Theologischen Fakultät der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Fachgebiet Mittelalterliche Geschichte am Institut für Geschichte und Kunstgeschichte der Technischen Universität Berlin und dem Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. It collects religious badges only. Finally, <http://www.let.kun.nl/ckd/kunera/>, supported by the Centrum voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie of the Radboud University in Nijmegen, Holland, offers a searchable database of images of hundreds of badges both secular and religious. All databases accessed on 25th April 2008.

¹¹ Image from the *Wallfahrt und Pilgerzeichen* project, according to which the badge was found in Lund, Sweden, testifying perhaps to the mobility of late medieval pilgrims.

¹² On the holy blood cult at Wilsnack see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

¹³ Andrea di Bonaiuto detail from a fresco entitled 'Church Militant and Triumphant', ca. 1360.

Many of the surviving badges, however, have secular themes. A subset of these displays sexual motifs, and in this category are found the badges with wandering genitalia. Following Malcolm Jones's example, I use the term sexual badges for this evidence (instead of the term erotic badges, which is used in German scholarship).¹⁴ Jones argues plausibly that the sexual badges are not pornographic in the modern sense, that is to say, they are not about sexual arousal, but that they are primarily apotropaic, intended to 'disarm that ever present yet vague malevolence known as the Evil Eye' by 'averting and diverting bad luck'.¹⁵ The following examples are typical. Many variations on the winged, belled, crowned, shod phallus survive (Figure Four). Vulvas are depicted in large numbers as well. Figure Five shows one crowned and riding on horseback, armed with a whip and a crossbow.

Most important for this paper is Jones's finding that the sexual badges 'think and work' metaphorically, that is to say, they incorporate and visualize a wide range of late medieval linguistic metaphors relating to the sex organs and sexual intercourse.¹⁶ A similar associative-metaphorical cognitive style, if you will, can be found in the texts as well. Some examples from the badges include the 'fiddle' held by the figure riding the penis, suggesting a pun on the verb 'to fiddle' (Middle High German *videlen*), which was used as a term for sexual intercourse in medieval Dutch and medieval German (Figure Six). Another example of metaphorical, associative thinking can be seen in Figure Seven. A woman wearing a wimple (an older, married woman?) and framed by trees (indicating that she is outdoors) is depicted kneeling, holding a spade and stroking a penis that is still underground. This image suggests a complex visual metaphor in which the penis functions like a seed because, in the area of generation and reproduction, it produces seed.

The crowns, alluding to the aristocratic elite, remind us that the badges are replete with satiric, social references. However, the most obvious feature shared by the badges and the German texts, is carnivalesque, in that the sexual parts are imagined as being mobile. The penis tree is carried through the streets. The stories relate escapades that transpire while the genitalia are wandering about on their own. The most frequently found badges insist on depicting mobility, showing penises and vulvas that can walk (or run?) because they have legs and feet, and are even often shod; that can fly because they have wings; that can sail in boats or ride on horseback. Modern beliefs in the

Courtesy of JSTOR, Collection, The Image Gallery, University of California at San Diego.

¹⁴ Johan H. Winkelmann and Gerhard Wolf, ed., *Erotik, aus dem Dreck gezogen*, Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik, 59 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). See also the richly illustrated volume by Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages: Discovering the Real Medieval World* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2002).

¹⁵ Jones, *Secret*, p. 248.

¹⁶ Jones, *Secret*, p. 249.

extreme geographical fixity of medieval people's lives notwithstanding, geographical mobility was an ordinary facet of medieval life, experienced through trade, pilgrimage, warfare, encounters with or lives lived as beggars and vagrants, migration over short and long distances. This mobility could be honorable or dishonorable, depending on profession, age, occupation, and gender. In the late medieval world, then, mobility carries weighty references, and can mean many things. This mutability may explain in part why mobility is referenced so frequently in the badges and in the texts. The figures on horseback allude to the privileged mobility of the governing classes, of knights and royalty. Pilgrimage, a religiously sanctioned form of mobility, is referenced. The metaphor of wandering, of mobility, may also allude to the vagrants, beggars, and social outcasts who populated the late medieval world. The historian Kathy Stuart reminds us that in the medieval world 'both religious and secular authorities were hostile towards transients who were not under the authority of any lord. As "masterless men" they could not readily be integrated into feudal society for they lacked the social identity that only a fixed position in the social hierarchy conferred.'¹⁷ The metaphor of mobility in the badges allows these body parts to suggest that they partake of many fixed social identities while not being answerable to any authority. 'Masterless' indeed! The modern term for this might be 'rebellious', a trait that well describes the characters we will meet in the stories. The vulva as pilgrim badge (Figure Eight) – note the pilgrim hat, staff, and rosary – thus effectively uses the metaphor of mobility to create religious satire, transforming pilgrimage – a form of socially and religiously sanctioned vagrancy – into an image of sexual promiscuity.

Thinking about mobility suggests a possible interpretation of a badge known in the secondary literature as 'vulva on stilts' (Figure Nine). The stilts could be a reference to traveling performers, or they may be a reference to crutches, and allude to beggars. In either case, the image would reference vagrants, who are mobile, 'masterless', and dishonorable. There may well be a visual-linguistic pun at work here as well. In Middle High German, the verb *stolzen* (which is etymologically related to stilts), means 'to be proud'. In a late medieval German text it is also used as a pun to refer to an erection. In the anonymous rhymed couplet text known as *Stepmother and Daughter*, a mother, giving her daughter advice on how to seduce men, suggests that the daughter leave her bodice unlaced to allow her breasts to be seen, as this will arouse him, which she expresses as 'causing his courage to rise' (*damit so stoltzet im der muot*).¹⁸

¹⁷ Kathy Stuart, *Defiled Trades and Social Outcasts: Honor and Ritual Pollution in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ 'Stiefmutter und Tochter/Stepmother and Daughter, Augsburg Redaction,' Chapter Four of *Ladies, Harlots, and Pious Women: A Source Book in Courtly, Religious, and Urban Cultures of Late Medieval Germany*, eds. and trans. Ann Marie Rasmussen and Sarah Westphal-Wihl, TEAMS Series, Medieval German Texts in Bilingual Editions (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications),

In sum, the badges allow us to see medieval images that are consistent with the texts, and the texts allow us to develop a narrative context for the badges. The texts tell comic stories about rivalry, aggression, and contested power between bodies and their parts and between men and women, with often unexpected winners and losers. The texts talk about the relationship between the part and the whole of the human body as a story about gender, a story about the social construction of what it means to be a man or a woman in this world, and they portray a way of thinking in which the alignment between sexed bodies and gender roles is never simple.



I turn now to plot summaries of the three texts in question.¹⁹

*Das Nonnenturnier*²⁰ is a narrative in two parts. In part one, a knight sleeps with a lady who has been pursuing him for a long time. As he prepares to depart, the lady asks for another tryst, which the knight declines, since it is his practice to spend only a single night with any lady. The scorned lady first threatens to tell everyone that he is impotent, and then tells the knight that if he castrates himself all women will adore him. Some time later, the knight and his penis get into a huge argument with one another, and the angry penis, too, champions castration:

zwor ir seint ein böser man.
 kund ir des nit verstan?
 euch ist manig gruß gegeben
 oft und dick von meinen wegen
 und habt zwor wirde und ere
 werlich von mir mere
 dan von dem deursten kleinot,
 das ir an euwerm leip irgen habt,
 und habt mich des noch nie ergetzet.
 Ir habt mich an ein stat gesetzt
 und in einen winkel bracht
 (es het den bösten knecht versmacht),

forthcoming 2009; line 178.

¹⁹ The most recent secondary literature on these texts is: Ralf Schlechtweg-Jahn, 'Geschlechtsidentität und höfische Kultur: zur Diskussion von Geschlechtermodellen in den sog. priapeischen Mären', in *Manlichiu wîp, wîplich man: zur Konstruktion der Kategorie Geschlecht in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. Ingrid Bennewitz und Helmut Tervooren (Berlin: E. Schmidt Verlag 1999), pp. 85–109; and Edith Wenzel, 'Zers und fud als literarische Helden. Zum "Eigenleben" von Geschlechtsteilen in mittelalterlicher Literatur', in *Körperteile. Eine kulturelle Anatomie*, ed. Claudia Benthien and Christoph Wulf (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2001), pp. 274–93.

²⁰ *Das Nonnenturnier*. Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Karlsruhe 408, fols. 30vb–35ra. 1430–1435, northern Swabia. Edition: Klaus Grubmüller, *Novellistik des Mittelalters: Märendichtung*. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 23 (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996), pp. 944–77.

so ir in irgent habt.
 wißet, das mich sein betragt.
 wert ir nit ein böser zage,
 ir snitet mich itzunt herabe,
 das frauen und man sehe,
 welchem under uns baß geschehe.

Das Nonnenturnier (ll. 185–202).

[Truly, you are a wicked man. Don't you get it? It's on my account that you are warmly received, and you have acquired more honor and dignity because of me than because of the most precious treasure you ever possessed, and yet you have never let me benefit in the least. Oh no, you have forced me into a corner, into the nastiest nook you possess, one that even the basest servant would refuse. I want you to know that I've had it. If you weren't such a base and lowborn coward, you would just cut me off right now so that women and men alike can see which of us fares better.]²¹

The knight castrates himself, an action that brings him universal scorn. The women to whom he turns for consolation mock him, beat him, and run him out of town, and he spends the last thirty-five years of his life as a hermit in a cave. So concludes part one. Part two narrates the fate of the penis, which goes to a convent and hides out under the stairs for a year (this may well be a comic allusion to the well-known medieval legend of Saint Alexis, who for years lived a life of holy poverty under the entryway stairs of his parental home, while going unrecognized by his family). Finally, in a state of utter despair, the penis decides to seek death at the hands of the nuns. It leaves its place of hiding to go and stand in the cloister walk. But rather than killing it, the nuns 'punish' it by taking it away to their chambers to 'chastise' it, i.e. have sex with it. Arguments and rivalries break out. After a novice reminds the community that goods brought into the convent are to be held in common and shared, the abbess proclaims a tournament for the nuns, with the penis as the prize. The nuns assemble the next day on a meadow, riding in formation under the banner of a naked man and carrying the penis on a silken pillow, which is placed so that it can view the jousts. The tournament degenerates into a wild brawl, during which the penis is stolen, and the disappearance of the prize puts an end to the tournament and the narrative.

Let us note in passing that by mocking the monastic way of life, this text partakes in the ubiquitous late medieval mode of religious satire. (One thinks, for example, of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.) Though the activities in the tale seem inimitable, they have echoes in sexual badges (Figure Ten). In this case, they both parody religious

²¹ This and all subsequent translations are mine.

processions, although the badge inverts the roles, showing a crowned vulva being carried by three penises, while in the text the nuns carry the penis on a litter.

The second text, *Der Rosendorn*,²² begins with an eavesdropping male narrator spying on a young lady, a virgin, who bathes daily in a beautiful, enclosed garden that she has built and now maintains for herself (the allusions here to the imagery associated with the Virgin Mary are unmistakable.) One day a magic root (*wurz*) that bestows speech somehow gets into her *fud* (vulgarly cunt), or vulva, and the vulva speaks up. Like the penis, it complains of ill treatment:

mich dunkt das gar zu vil,
 das euch selber ist so wol,
 und das ich sein nicht genissen sol,
 wann man euch an aller stat
 nicht dann durch mich liep hat,
 ob ir mein allein enpert,
 das ir idem man wert unwert.

Der Rosendorn II, ll. 100–106.

[I think it's too much that you are thriving and yet I am not allowed a share, especially considering that men everywhere adore you only because of me, and if you were to lose me, every single one of them would find you completely worthless.]

An argument erupts between the lady and her vulva, and they angrily separate. The lady gives herself to a suitor, who rejects her the moment he discovers that he cannot have sex with her. She is mocked and shunned by the entire community, who point at her and shout: 'Look, there goes the cuntless woman!' ['ein fingerzeigen wart uf sie: "secht, die futlos get hie."'].²³ The vulva offers itself to a young man, but he mistakes it for a toad and kicks it away. So the vulva returns to its lady, who is glad to see it, but the problem of being physically reunited remains. Eavesdropping male narrator to the rescue! The young lady asks the narrator to teach her how to keep her vulva from running away again, and the narrator obliges by, as the text phrases it, nailing the vulva back in place.²⁴

²² *Der Rosendorn I*. Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Msc. M 68, fols. 50ra–51vb. 1447, east Swabia (Augsburg?); Karlsruhe 408, fol. 190va (lines 1–16); *Der Rosendorn II*, Karlsruhe 408, fol. 141ra–142vb. Edition in Hanns Fischer, ed., *Die deutsche Märendichtung des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen, 12 (München: Beck, 1966), pp. 444–61. Passages cited from *Der Rosendorn II*; the textual variations between the two versions are interesting, but do not affect the points being made in this article.

²³ Lines 189–90 (*Der Rosendorn II*).

²⁴ Lines 237–42.

*Gold und Zers*²⁵ is a dispute between Gold (a golden coin) and Penis about which one of them women love the most. It, too, is reported by an eavesdropping male narrator. After trading insults, Penis and Gold decide to put their rivalry to the test by asking a noblewoman to choose between them. She chooses Gold. This wounds Penis deeply. It laments and then decides to run away in order to teach a lesson to the women (the text simply switches from one lady to a community of women without comment.) A few weeks pass, and they all miss one another (graphically described as a kind of itching). The women throw Gold onto the dunghill (a fate analogous to that of the castrated knight in the *Nonnenturnier*). A maidservant finds Penis sunning itself by a fountain, and she brings it back to the community of women. First they have sex with it and then they discuss how to keep it from running away again. A nun advises that Penis be blinded by cutting off its eyes (testicles). This is done. The nun takes the penis's eyes and binds them to her chest, where they turn into breasts. This is another example of the associative style of thinking that we have encountered in the badges, which provides the narrator with his concluding parodic fable on the origins of male sexual functioning:

die augen si an ir herz pant.
do si das pant dannen prach,
zwei schön prüstl si sach,
die waren sundr laugen
gewachsen auß des zers augen.
davon habent noch die weib
also prüstelochten leib:
swenn ain man mit plosser hant
daran greifet, sazehant
der zers sich pald aufmachtet,
er snellt auf und lachtet,
er beginnet reken die lider
und went, man well im geben wider
die augen, die er hat verloren.

Gold und Zers I, ll. 242–55.

²⁵ *Gold und Zers I*. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 2885, fols. 120ra–122va. 1393, Innsbruck. Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Cod.. FB 32001, fols. 58vb–60ra. 1456, Tirol (closely related to Wien 2885). Karlsruhe 408, fols. 190va–190vb (lines 1–57); *Gold und Zers II*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, cgm 5919, fols. 258v–262r. 1501–ca. 1510, Regensburg. Editions for *Gold und Zers* and *Rosendorn*: in Fischer, pp. 431–43; 444–61.

[Then she bound the eyes to her chest, and when she removed the binding she saw two beautiful breasts, which had grown (no lie!) from the penis's eyes. And that is why women still have bosomed bodies, and whenever a man touches their breasts with his bare hand, right away the penis gets up, he raises himself up and smiles, he begins stretching his limbs and believes that his lost eyes will be returned to him.]

These three texts are about a kind of sexuality that is most interested in the penis or the phallus. They posit a form of phallus-oriented sexuality based on the idea that the human body is intrinsically fragmented. The body is imagined as a bunch of parts loosely organized and imperfectly held together, and the 'part', the 'fragment', is forever searching for wholeness. (This way of thinking of about the body surely contrasts with *The Vagina Monologues*!) Further, in these three medieval texts, the quest of the wandering body part involves violence. The texts tell a story about sexuality as a story about rivalry and contested power, especially in the relationships between men and women, a story about gender as a struggle for power.

There are lots of different kinds of bodies in these texts and the relationships between them are complex. There are the wandering genitalia, of course. There are socially constructed bodies – knights, ladies, servants, and nuns. There are sexually constructed bodies – men who have sex with women, women who have sex with men, virgins, and eunuchs. There is at least one true personification, namely, Gold.

And finally, there are bodiless male bodies, that is to say, the eavesdropping male narrators of *Gold und Zers* and *Rosendorn*, the retrospective witnesses who report the stories. The eavesdropping male narrator is a rhetorical framing device, in which the eavesdropper is a disembodied, narrating, text-producing, and sometimes moralizing voice (though not here!). It is widely used in late medieval German *Minnereden* and *maeren*, texts that are contemporaneous with these.²⁶ Figure Eleven shows a fifteenth-century illumination of a narrator eavesdropping on a conversation between two women taken from a German literary manuscript. The German-language rhymed couplet text being illustrated here is gallant and courtly, not vulgar, but I show this to point out that this topos is quite common.

The eavesdropping narrators represent a special kind of body in these texts. They are male; indeed, the late medieval German rhymed couplet tradition contains no examples of female eavesdropping narrators. What is important here is that the narrator manages to define textual authority as masculine while posing as a genderless, omniscient text. In *Gold und Zers* the motif of the eavesdropping male narrator is used quite conventionally. In *Rosendorn*, however, the narrator turns out to have a penis

²⁶ Ann Marie Rasmussen, 'Gendered Knowledge and Eavesdropping in the Late-Medieval *Minnerede*', *Speculum* 77 (2002), 1168–94.

himself. This is to my knowledge a singular exception in late medieval German rhymed couplet texts, an example of exposing the convention by breaking it. The ‘deflowering’ of the virgin by the eavesdropping male narrator is paradoxically an act of repair, for it is represented as the act that re-assembles her body and makes her a ‘complete’ woman again. The act of sexual intercourse is represented as an act of mending that creates wholeness out of fragments. This assaults the medieval ideology of virginity, which viewed virginity as a different kind of sexuality and as a source of great power.²⁷ In *Rosendorn*, though, the ‘complete’ woman is the one who has lost the power of magical intactness. She becomes complete by losing her virginity.

There are parallels in *Rosendorn* and *Nonnenturnier* between the human characters who have lost their genitalia. In *Rosendorn*, the woman who has lost her vulva is rejected by her erstwhile suitor because, without a vulva, she is worthless. The knight in *Nonnenturnier* endures a similar fate: without his penis, he becomes an outcast and is shunned by the world. These ‘de-sexed’ human characters lose their position and power in society: their loss of their ‘sex’ translates into a loss of ‘gender’ (that is to say, the social construction of sexual difference) as well. But in crucial ways, the outcomes differ by gender, too, for in *Rosendorn*, for a woman, this loss is repairable, but in *Gold und Zers*, for the penis, it is not.

The oddest bodies of them all, the penis and vulva, have, in literary terms, the magnetism of enterprising villains. They are tricksters whose pranks are not crimes but rather practical jokes, or rogues who depend (not always successfully) on wit and ruthlessness for survival.²⁸ They speak, they act, and they have minds of their own, as the saying goes, that is to say, they have an individual will. They share a common character profile: they are articulate, impulsive, brash, and as was noted earlier, they are mobile. They are always running away, and then regretting it and trying to return (in the *Nonnenturnier* the penis goes to a convent; in *Gold und Zers* and *Rosendorn*, the body part runs off and comes back). ‘Masterless’ vagrants, their rebelliousness may suggest that in crucial ways they partake in St Augustine’s classic view that the pudenda acquired their shamefulness as a consequence of Adam and Eve’s fall, which resulted in lusts that cannot be regulated by the will.²⁹ The rebellious body parts in *Nonnenturnier* and *Rosendorn* express from the beginning intense dissatisfaction with and rivalry towards their bodies, feelings that are apparently reciprocated. In *Gold und Zers*, the penis never had a body in the first place. No one in these stories – least

²⁷ See for example the illuminating essays in *Medieval Virginites*, eds. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

²⁸ For a wonderful study of the trickster motif in folklore across cultures and time, see Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

²⁹ Ziolkowski, *Obscenity*, p. 12.

of all the wandering genitalia – starts out from an imagined edenic, physical state of harmonious oneness. Everything is always already fragmented and conflictive.

Nevertheless, the wandering nature of these body parts, their mobility, is the central problem of the stories – their propensity to run away and their longing to return. It is a problem for the body parts themselves, and for the other characters in the stories (whether they are the ‘original owners’ of the parts or not), who take drastic and violent steps to curb the body parts’ tendencies to roam. In *Nonnenturnier*, no one, not the knight, or the lady, or the nuns, in spite of threats, promises, castration, and tournament brawls, can keep the penis, which disappears again. In both *Rosendorn* and *Gold und Zers*, however, the wandering genitalia are kept in check through decisive action, in *Gold und Zers* by the violent blinding of the penis and in *Rosendorn* by nailing the vulva back in place.

I had hoped to find a badge that captured some aspect of the ambivalence that the wandering genitalia show towards their original bodies. The best I could find is one that combines the iconography of mobility (the phallus and vulva as pilgrims) with an image of domesticity or domesticated companionship (Figure Twelve).

There is an interesting difference between the vulva badges and *Rosendorn*. The badge vulvas are immediately recognizable. But in *Rosendorn* the vulva, alone on its journey through the world, is unrecognizable: the text says that the knights whom the vulva approaches ‘mistook her for a toad’ (*man het sie für ein krotten*).³⁰ In the visual economy of the text the vulva without its body is an unintelligible body part, one that has no use value. This difference between text and badge regarding the vulva contrasts with the unified front shown by texts and badges on the unmistakable recognizability of the penis. All the characters in *Gold und Zers* and *Nonnenturnier* instantly recognize the penis. In the *Nonnenturnier*, when the penis first appears in the convent the nuns ‘all screamed: “What is it?” But instantly they saw what it was’ [‘si schrien alle: “was ist das?” doch sahen sie schiere, was es was’ (ll. 317–18).] Nor do any of the characters in *Gold und Zers* (not the eavesdropping narrator or the many women in the text) have the slightest doubt about the identity of the penis.

There is a theory of sexuality at work here. The penis is always recognizable; what matters in the texts is that it is always recognized as a penis by women, in a way that not only guarantees heterosexuality but most importantly that makes the penis as phallus the primary signifier and symbol of sexual drive. There are more women than men in these three stories. All three texts assert that both men and women can have the phallus. *Nonnenturnier* and *Gold und Zers* show women alone and communities of women fighting, riding in tournaments, and aggressively asserting their demands

³⁰ Toads are the familiars of witches.

in order to keep it.³¹ Thus, in both *Gold und Zers* and *Nonnenturnier*, this masculinist order of representation is upheld by the female gaze and by violence. Indeed, in these two texts the symbolic value of the penis exceeds the symbolic value of the intact male body.³² *Nonnenturnier* could be read as an originary fable of the cultural creation of the phallus as a signifier, in which everybody wants the power of the phallus (including the poor knight who castrates himself), but nobody has it.

All of this raises an interesting question about the gendered status of the penis itself. In *Nonnenturnier* its brashness and awareness of power and social position could be understood as masculine. Indeed, in its argument with the knight the penis complains that it has been neglected, degraded, and enfeebled, in a word, feminized socially. Yet it goes to a convent. Does it think it is a woman? No. Is it seeking the one place on earth where it believes it will have no rivals? No. It goes to the convent to hide out and seek death at the hands of the nuns because it holds the conventional belief that the nuns are pious and celibate and they will therefore immediately identify it as an unwanted intruder and murder it. The fact that the penis is therefore ignorant of what the text constructs as woman's lustful nature, a standard trope of late medieval misogyny, is surely one of the great comic points of the story. In any case, the penis's life in the convent as a masculine figure is odd. The nuns adopt masculine prerogatives of fighting in tournaments; they are assertive and aggressive in their actions to get what they desire, while the penis is passive, a trophy, which observes the tournament like a lady, and which is silent, which has become an instrument to be used. This is the paradox: the penis's presence in the convent is so hyper-masculine that it sets off chaos, but on the other hand its way of being in the world is not so much feminized as instrumentalized. The only way out of this ambivalence is, apparently, for the penis to disappear, presumably to become a roving trickster once more.

This theory of what I am calling masculinist sexuality still holds for *Gold und Zers*, but differently. The primacy of the visual is given its most graphic representation in this story by the motif of the blinding of the penis, which introduces a second or secondary castration to the story (secondary in that I am assuming a kind of primary one preceding the story).

Again, the value of the penis resides chiefly in the community of women, whose blinding of the penis could be construed as an assault on the penis's privileged role

³¹ According to Schlechtweg-Jahn, in this case, *der zagel* is 'nur das herausragende körperliche Merkmal einer durch verschiedene soziale Verhaltensweisen definierten Männlichkeit' ('only the prominent, physical feature of a masculinity defined by social behaviours', p. 93).

³² The penis's excessive value forms the basis for all three texts' comedic delight in the grotesque, and it underwrites the many penis symbols in these texts: there are the sticks with which the women beat the knight; the lances and swords used by the nuns; the banner of the naked man; the dildo in *Gold und Zers*, and so on.

within a phallic symbolic economy and on the primacy of the visual itself. The women blind the penis in order to enslave it for their own pleasure. They deploy masculinist sexuality as a strategy by taking a part from the 'whole penis' in order to master it, blinding it by removing its eyes so that it cannot wander any more. This strategy is intended to ensure pleasure in a community of women, and that female sexuality becomes not what a man wants, but what a woman wants. But do they succeed? For what emerges from these actions is an unexpected, strong element of male auto-eroticism. The violence of women's desire to keep the penis is re-inscribed onto the woman's body through the 'eyes' that turn into breasts. The narrator then tells us a fable about male sexual functioning and male sexual desire. The penis stands up when the breast is touched because it wants its own eyes back. The primacy of the visual has been sacrificed, but its place is taken by touch. It is the penis's desire to have its own eyes back that arouses it. The violence in metonymy has been relocated so that the woman's body attains new value, namely the value of the penis's longing for completeness, which is, this story claims, ultimately nothing more than its longing for itself.



I come to my conclusions. What have we learned by studying the texts and badges together? Then as now, society has competing standards of obscenity (police and court records; theologians; these texts and badges), and while some clerics railed, other medieval authors and audiences prized notions of 'creative obscenity'. This in turn reminds us of the ways in which late medieval clerical and secular worlds are interlaced and intertwined, not because ordinary medieval people were so pious, although some surely were, but because the medieval clerical world could be worldly. A badge found in the city of Constance, Germany, shows a naked woman standing at an anvil and forging a penis. I understand this image to be a parody of one of the most well-known female allegories of late medieval pan-European clerical culture, Dame Nature, who is often shown (fully clothed, of course) forging a human figure.³³ My point is that the obscenity, the parody, can be understood only within the context of clerical culture.

³³ For an image of the badge and further information regarding it, visit the Kunera website (note ten) and click on the map at the city of Constance. See Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses. Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003).

Looking at the texts and badges together and in more detail could contribute to recent work that is rethinking the clerical world, and seeking to historicize medieval misogyny by seeing the late medieval cleric as a difficult and embattled professional masculine identity formation.³⁴ The texts satirize the religious life and argue vehemently that celibacy is a ludicrous sham that can only fail. The texts and the badges also remind us that there is a strong materialist, hedonistic world view also present in the late Middle Ages, in which, as Charles Muscatine says, the things to be most prized in life are ‘food, money, sex, and wit’, as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* so graphically illustrates.³⁵ The badges suggest that we might consider adding to this list of things most prized a positive valuation of fertility and reproduction. This aspect of the badges may also touch directly or indirectly on the preoccupations of late medieval natural philosophy with reproduction, which is summed up in the phrase ‘secrets of women’. And surely the evidence of the badges supports the work of historians of science and medicine such as Katherine Park and Joan Cadden debunking the notion of the ‘one-sex’ body popularized by Thomas Laqueur as a world view in the Middle Ages.³⁶

These texts and images leave me wondering, how did medieval people think about their bodies? As systems in the way we do? As bounded? Or as loose assemblages of parts, each subject to influences from beyond itself, with porous boundaries and only incidentally held together in its present shape. For now, I am left with a concluding question. Whose psycho-sexual anxiety is this, anyway? Surely these are comic images and stories that use obscenity creatively to argue that the discursive processes of corporeal division and re-signification, i.e. our ways of making meaning about our bodies, are at base disorderly, incongruous, outrageous, and farcical. I am reminded of the words of the literary scholar T.G.A. Nelson: ‘Comic fantasy seldom consists of pure imaginative play: it offers a creative critique of our modes of thought,

³⁴ For recent work on medieval clerics, see P.H. Cullum, ‘Boy/Man Into Clerk/Priest: The Making of the Late Medieval Clergy,’ in *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Nicola F. McDonald and W.M. Ormrod (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), 51–81; Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); and Maureen C. Miller, ‘Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era,’ *Church History* 72, no. 1 (2003): 25–52.

³⁵ ‘The (Re)invention of Vulgarity,’ in *Obscenity*, ed. Ziolkowski, pp. 281–92, here p. 288. See also Muscatine’s wonderful study, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

³⁶ For important critiques of Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1990), see Katharine Park and Robert A. Nye, ‘Destiny is Anatomy’, *New Republic* 18 (February 1991): 53–57; and also Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), especially pp. 186–87. See also Joan Cadden, *The Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

especially those which seek to impose a rigid or unimaginative conception of reality upon humankind.³⁷

For now, I will say that these late medieval, Northern European texts and badges display congruent theories about sex as sexuality. They say that sex is about pleasure, violence, and power, and that it is an antagonistic enterprise. This is not asserted in a moralizing fashion; sex is not condemned, it is not a bad thing. Rather, according to the badges and the texts, sex is a game with a force of nature that makes fools of us all.

³⁷ T.G.A. Nelson, *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).



2. Holy wafers from Wilsnack [p.4]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0130, Inv. 1709)



3. Pilgrim hat badges [p.4]

(JSTOR Collection, The Image Gallery, University of California, San Diego)



4. Phallus with wings, bells and crown [p.5]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0634, Inv. 1856)



5. Vulva on horseback [p.5]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0656, Inv. 1323)



6. 'Fiddling' musician riding phallus [p.5]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0645, Inv. 1845)



7. Woman stroking a buried penis [p.5]
(Stedelijk Museum Ieper SM 2954, HP2 1746)



8. Vulva as pilgrim [p.6]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0665, Inv. 1324)



9. Vulva on stilts [p.6]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0660, Inv. 1847)



10. Profane procession [p.9]
(Medieval Badge Foundation, HP1 0652, Inv. 0967)



11. Eavesdropping male narrator [p.11]

(Heidelberg University Library, Cod. Pal. germ. 344, fol. 49v.).

HeidICON. Die Heidelberger Bilddatenbank. Codices Palatini germanici online:

<http://palatina-digital.uni-hd.de>



12. Phallus and vulva as 'domesticated companionship' [p.13]
(Stedelijk Museum Ieper, SM 2957, HP2 17620)

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